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ABSTRACT

Children's natural curiosity should be more adequately satisfied, resarch has suggested--especially in grades 4 to 6. Traditionally, the scope and sequence approach which is a learning-what-others think or have thought rather than a learning-to-think-for-oneself method begins during the middle school years. It is interesting to observe that thinking has been found to be a common phenomena among young people outside the school but not in the classrooms. By the time most have become adults they have largely stopped thinking. It has been claimed by Hofstadter that United States society as a whole devalues thinking except under certain controlled circumstances. The task of developing soundly educated (thinking) people is therefore not simply a school task: it is also a societal task. Even though educators need to be careful to avoid superficial understanding and superficial implementation, there is much opportunity, for individual teachers especially, to explore and experiment with thinking experiences in their classrooms. An experience that involved devising a plan to help educators improve social studies education in grades K through 12 is here recounted in this paper. (BZ)

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BY

LARRY M. ARNOLDSEN

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Writing, Reasoning and 10 Year Olds

by Larry M. Arnoldsen

The 5th grade class of Mrs. Reddy's looked at me curiously as I entered the classroom. Apparently visitors were not frequent. I myself wondered what I was there for. Never having been a teacher in elementary schools, my willingness to come and see what could be done to "improve" Mrs. Reddy's social studies program had more unknowns than I cared to admit, though I was the social studies specialist for that region of the state.

My job was to help educators improve social studies education in grades K through 12. My teaching background was in secondary education and then, mostly high school. At this point it seemed to me the best way to help was for me to begin working with these children and discover what the possibilities were. Then maybe I would have something realistic and practical to suggest to this elementary teacher.

With my arrival the children were dismissed for recess in order for Mrs. Reddy and I to visit. "What would you like to do?" she asked. "I'd like to talk to the children, but tell me what you've been doing." She told me briefly what had been happening, but "the kids don't like it much," she said. Mrs. Reddy was in an "inservice" class I was conducting for teachers of social studies and had taken me up on my offer to visit her classroom and try to be of help.

Meeting the Children

When the children were back in the room I was introduced. I asked them if they would like to ask me any questions. "Why are you here?" someone asked. "To help Mrs. Reddy in her effort to be a better teacher of social studies," I responded. The children were friendly and open. My presence was a welcome change of pace. They obviously were interested in seeing what might happen next. "Would you mind telling me what you learn when you learn social studies?" I began. The room became quieter. Someone said, "Our American Heritage?" I thought about this very typical student answer to a teacher question while waiting for any additional responses. None came. They were waiting for me to pronounce the answer right or wrong.

"What do you learn when you learn about our American Heritage?" I then asked. Again, an answer was offered: "Freedom. That's what our heritage is--freedom, isn't it?" Again there was a look of "is that right?" on their faces. "Tell me about freedom. What do you mean?" I asked. We went around the room, each child being asked to say what they thought. Did they agree, disagree? "What do you think?" I pushed. When everyone had had a chance to make an observation I drew their attention to what I had written on the blackboard as they spoke. I had been writing down their various statements. Of course, the definitions were different. "Could all of them be right?" They didn't think so and couldn't tell how to decide which was best or correct.

A New Kind of Social Studies

While this discussion was going on I began to wonder what they would think of an activity formulating in my mind. "Would you be willing to do something for me? Would you be willing to pretend that you were writing a letter? This letter would be to another child of your age--a child in the

Soviet Union." They were to tell this Russian child about freedom because, of course, "they don't have it, do they?" "No," they said. They would write the letters, but we wouldn't mail them. We would just pretend that we did. "How many of you would be willing to do that?" I asked. All hands went up. "Would you do something else for me? Find or draw a picture that you feel defines freedom. In other words, something that one could just look at and know what freedom is. This is to go with your letter to help the Russian child understand the meaning of freedom, should what you write not be properly understood. Then, do one other thing. Would you write a brief explanation for me as to why you think the picture you chose or drew tells what freedom is. Will you also do that?" They said they would.

Our discussion had continued for over an hour. Mrs. Reddy said it was lunch time. The children left. Mrs. Reddy said this had all been very interesting and she wondered how the children would do. I certainly didn't know, but asked her if this could be the children's social studies for the remainder of the week. It was now Monday. "Don't ask them to do anything else, just this," I urged. She agreed without hesitation and asked what she should do. I said she should help them any way except not to do the writing or choosing of a picture. Mainly she was to respond to requests for help. I also added that if they finished in a few days or tomorrow, "Don't have them do any more social studies this week. Let them use the time for other things. Let's see what happens." She agreed.

The First Week's Results

The following Monday I returned. As I entered the room, Mrs. Reddy saw me, got up from her desk, and came quickly to meet me. "Oh, Mr. Arnoldsen," she said, "you must come and look at what the children have done!" As we got to her desk, she pointed at three stacks of papers. She picked up the "letters" while saying, "These are the finest essays I've ever seen children this age write!" "Essays?" I said, "who said anything about essays? These are just letters--pretend letters." We were both smiling broadly at each other.

In the meantime, the children had stopped their work and were waiting with eager faces. I said hello and they smiled and greeted me in return. I asked Mrs. Reddy if I could visit with the children, and she said, "Why of course. Please do."

I picked up the stack of pictures and a chair and sat down in front of the children. I also motioned them to slide their desks in close around me. I held up the first picture and asked whose it was. It was a Civil War battle scene. A little girl raised her hand and said it was hers. I said, "Now I know you have written about why you think this picture says what freedom is, but would you mind just telling us why you think so?" She said, "Because you got to fight for it!" "Humm, is that so? You mean to have freedom there must be fighting? There must be war? Fighting is necessary to get freedom in the first place or to keep it in the second place, or both?" She nodded that it was both. "I see," I said, "then what you're saying is that from time to time there will have to be some fighting, some war or we won't be able to keep freedom. Is that what we have to expect?" She again nodded that she agreed.

I then asked the other children what they thought. Did they agree? Was war necessary? Must we expect it? Is war inevitable? After some discussion they all seemed to be in agreement: War is necessary. I now raised a new

question. "A few days ago I was down at the little park on the bank of the river that runs through our town. As I was walking along I came upon a piece of metal, bronze metal about eight by fourteen inches in size imbedded in the lawn. As I looked around I found a dozen or more altogether. On each plaque was a name, a man's name. There also were some dates. On the left was the date 1899 or 1900. On the right was the date, October, 1918. What had I discovered? What were those plaques?" Someone offered, "They were graves, soldiers' graves." "Of who?" I said. "Of World War I soldiers", one of the children said.

"How old were they?" I asked. "Eighteen and nineteen," was the answer. "How many of you have a brother, uncle or cousin who is eighteen or nineteen years old?" A lot of hands went up. "Would it be all right if your brother or uncle or cousin had to go to a war and fight to keep our freedom? What if he were killed? Would freedom be worth the life of someone near and dear to you?" I asked. The children had grown very quiet and thoughtful and seemed not to want to respond to my last questions.

The Second Assignment

It was now clear to me what I wanted social studies to be this next week, and so I said, "I want to ask you to do something. Will you go home today and ask your parents or someone else's parents who have an 18 or 19-year-old son if freedom would be worth the life of their son. If he went off to a war and died, would freedom be worth that? And then tomorrow and the next day would you ask someone else the same question? Ask two or three parents this week what they think. Then write down what they tell you. Also, write down what you think of what the parents say. Would you do that this week? How many of you would be willing to do that for me?" They all agreed. I said I'd be back next Monday to see what they had found out. Mrs. Reddy then sent them out for recess.

After they were gone, Mrs. Reddy and I talked about what had happened, and I asked her to let the interviews and the recording of those interviews be social studies for the week. Invite the students to do writing regarding the interviews in class including their own thoughts and assist them any way she could.

For the second week we tested the tolerance of these 10 year olds' for weighty thought and writing. They seemed willing and able and according to Mrs. Reddy, "accomplished work she had never before seen in 30 years of teaching and had never thought such youngsters could do." Mrs. Reddy also confessed she had not done such deep thinking before herself. Well, I certainly didn't know what these kids could do. I had found 9th graders and older students could do what was being attempted here and that they had liked it. I was finding 10-year olds could and did too.

I've Brought a Surprise!

The next Monday when I arrived, more papers were stacked on Mrs. Reddy's desk. Again she was enthusiastic over what had been done. The children seemed happy to see me. I told them I had brought something to show. They, of course, saw that I was carrying some things.

I had brought a slide-sound show created by a colleague: The sound was the music and words to "This Land is Your Land;" the slides were pictures

matched to the words in the song. For example, a picture of a redwood tree was to appear on the screen when the words "redwood forest" were heard. I had only recently learned of this excellent production and realized at once its potential value as a stimulus to thought and writing with these children, or so I hoped anyway.

The children were eager to see what I had, and I proceeded immediately to set up the equipment. Soon we were ready. We pulled the blinds and began the show. It took only five minutes or so and when it was over, the children plead to see it again. So we saw it again. They wanted to see it again. We did. That seemed to satisfy them. I next began playing a game with them. One of the pictures would be flashed on the screen and they'd be asked what words in the song matched. The words would be identified and another picture would be shown. This continued for ten minutes or so, afterwhich I went to the blackboard and wrote the words of the song next to the picture being viewed. The room was light enough to see the writing. The students were then asked what they thought of the picture. "Was it the best one to go with the words or did they think there might be a better one?" We evaluated the suitability of a number of pictures and the words to be illustrated. Finally I asked, "Would you do something for me this week? Would each of you select or draw your own set of pictures to illustrate the words in the song? How many of you would be willing to do that?" All their hands went up. "Great!" I said, "Now will you do one more thing? Will you briefly explain why you choose a particular picture to go with the words?" They agreed. I said I'd come back next Monday and see what they had done.

A Strange Way to Plan

This weekly visitation to Mrs. Reddy's 5th grade class was continued for nearly two months. Each week's social studies usually evolved out of the previous week's work. I rarely knew what would happen next until I'd had a chance to see what had been done while I was gone and had talked with the kids. A new activity would then suggest itself to me. Mrs. Reddy seemed pleased with what was developing, although it was very different from what she'd seen or done.

About two months of school were left when I stopped going to this classroom. Mrs. Reddy asked me what she should do the remaining months. The kids had liked selecting pictures and writing explanations for the "This Land is Your Land" song so much that if I were her, I would ask them if they would like to do some more of that kind of thing. "I think they would," I said. First, they could, with her help, make a collection of songs about our country. Second, each child could choose the song he or she liked most and put pictures and written explanations to the words. Third, the class as a whole could learn the songs and practice singing them. They could put on a singing show for a school assembly and an evening program for parents. Of course their pictures/drawings could be displayed in the classroom. I don't know what Mrs. Reddy did the last two months of the school year, but I was surely impressed with what these children had done. They could indeed do first-rate thinking and first-rate writing, and what they did was more than adequate social studies.

What About Research?

The middle school years are indeed a time in which children are capable of doing much more with their minds than is customary. In fact, research for some time has suggested that grades 4 - 6 is a time when children's natural curiosity should be more adequately satisfied (Taylor, 1964). These are the years in which the traditional scope and sequence begins: Social Studies; English (language arts); Math; Science. And the traditional scope and sequence is administered as learning-what-others-think or have thought rather than in terms of what the child, the student thinks (Piaget, 1970).

Not only are middle school students capable of doing more, they by nature require a different kind of education than they experience traditionally. Traditional education is essentially learning by rote. For education to be produced the mind must engage in activities which have generally come to be called thinking activities (Piaget, 1970). It has been found that the most productive thinking occurs when studying in specific content areas in contrast to a course of study in thinking per se. ". . . rather than offering separate thinking skills programs, schools should concentrate on teaching science, and reading and mathematics in such ways that people learn to think better through those content areas" (Brandt 1986; Torrance, 1970).

If thinking is to be taught in the subject areas it is also important to note that subject matter must be taught differently also. It must be taught and therefore learned as knowledge-in-the-process-of-development rather than as knowledge which has been finalized and settled (Joyce, 1985).

It is interesting to observe that thinking has been found to be a common phenomena among young people outside the school, but not so much in the classrooms (Taylor, 1964; Fincher, 1976). By the time most have become adults they have largely stopped thinking outside the school as well (DeBono, 1972; James, 1958). It has been claimed that American society as a whole devalues thinking except under certain controlled circumstances (Hofstadter, 1964; Henry, 1965). The point being that educators have a great task before them if they are to take seriously what it means to develop soundly educated (thinking) people. It's not just a school task, it's a societal task as well. Educators must become thinkers and lead society to prize and practice thought. That's a challenge in light of the fact that the education of educators was largely traditional in kind: thinking was largely absent (Fuller, 1979; Perkins, 1986).

There is a need for caution, though, in any attempt to bring about more teaching through thinking. Because, there is little knowledge and experience among educators generally of what it means to think, especially in the content areas; and then, what it means to teach thinking, there is danger of a general movement failing in its objectives. Superficial understanding and superficial implementation have led to the demise of many well intended efforts to improve education (Polanyi, 1964; Hart, 1986).

Conclusion

There has been much researched and written on the topic of teaching thinking for teachers to read and ponder. Even though we need to be careful about too many trying to do too much too soon, there is lots of room and opportunity for individual teachers especially, to explore and experiment with

thinking experiences in their classrooms. It is hoped that the experiment reported herein will serve as an example of what might be attempted.

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